Lars

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THE WET SNOW slid in front of the windshield wipers as they passed back and forth. The falling flakes seemed to pause in the beams from the bus headlights. There was a whine of rubber against ice and an odor of diesel oil as the motor raced, forcing the bus closer to the door of the bus station. The sound of the large tires crunching snow ceased and the bus stopped. The door swung open and a brute of a man stepped down and stood looking up at the station sign. The bus door closed and the diesel smell became stronger as the tires whined again.

"Some burg." He stood well over six feet and his shoulders brushed against both sides of the station door as he entered. His face was pock-marked and when he smiled at the waitress she saw two prominent yellow dog teeth on either side of an empty gap where other teeth had once been. He continued to grin at her and sat down at the counter.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

His grin got bigger and he winked at her. She shuffled her feet and her lips tightened. A man in a white apron came over and motioned the waitress away. "We got mighty good beef stew tonight."

"Nice looking broad."

"My wife. Stew?"

"Yep. Mighty nice looking broad. To hell with your stew. I want to see Lars."

"Lars don't come in often."

"Send the broad after him."

"What you want with Lars?"

"Didn't you hear me? I said send the broad after him."

"You want Lars, you get him—youself."

"Hey, broad. Come here."

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"Don't keep calling my wife a broad!"
"Joe, don't start anything. What you want, mister?"
"How'd you like to see me give your old man a knuckle sandwich?"
"Now, mister, he ain't done a thing to you."
"I told him to send you after Lars and he told me to go myself."
"What you want Lars for?"
"Now ain't this a nosy town? You better do what I tell you."
"Lars don't come in often, does he, Joe?"
"My wife's telling the truth."
"I've had enough shilly-shallying around. Girlee, get going 'fore I get sore!"
"Don't order my wife around."
"Joe, don't get him mad. I don't mind going."
"That's better. At least the broad has some sense."
"Now just a damned minute there . . ."
"Joe, don't. I don't mind going. Really, I need a little walk."
"Lars won't come over if he don't know why."
"All right, I'll tell you why. I'm choosing Lars."
"Choosing Lars? What for? What'd Lars ever do to you?"
"People think he's tough."
"Sure he's strong. But he ain't no fighter."
"He must think he's tough — pulling alone against five men on the other end of the rope."
"That's just sport. Just for funning."
"I think he's acting tough and I aim to try him."
"You ought not bother Lars. He's not a young man anymore."
"I aim to show everyone I'm the toughest man around here."
"People don't even know you in this town."
"They will. Say, girlee, git going."

She took her coat from a peg behind the cash register and, putting it on, went to the door.

He yelled, "I ain't got all night, girlee."
She closed the door behind her and waded through the
snow to the bus tracks. The snow felt good hitting her face and clinging to her eyebrows. Occasionally she skidded her feet along the icy road. She could see Mrs. Svedbom's chicken house before she turned into their walk. A blond woman with a pudgy figure opened the door. The house smelled of cabbage and freshly made coffee. The blond woman opened the door wide when she recognized her. "Come in. That be wet snow."

"Thank you, Mrs. Svedbom."
"I get you coffee."
"No. I've got to talk to Lars."
"Lars!" A barrel-built man came into the room. His deep blue eyes sparkled among freckles. He rubbed a thick fingered hand over the few remaining strands of red hair.
"It be good to see you."
"Lars, there's a man down at the bus station that says he's going to fight you."
"Fight? Me? I got no enemies."
"He's from the city."
"I know nobody in city."
"He said he'd beat up Joe if I didn't come after you."
"We go talk to man," Lars said.
Mrs. Svedbom shook her head, saying, "No! Lars, you call the cop."
"No. I talk to man."
"You call cop."
"I talk to man."
Mrs. Svedbom shook her head again and as she left the room said, "You call cop."
"Lars, your wife's right. We better call the cop."
"No, the man want me. I talk to him."
"But he don't want to talk. He says he's choosing you."
"Choosing me? He play games?"
"He means he's going to fight you."
"I got no enemies."
"You don't understand, Lars. When you walk in the bus station he's going to start fighting you."
"I don't know him. Why should we fight?"
"He says you acted tough pulling the rope against five men."
“Six men.”
“Okay, six men. This man is a big ugly brute.”
“I big, too.”
“But you don’t fight, Lars.”
“Who says? I’m not afraid.”
“I didn’t say you were afraid.”
“Okay. We go talk now.” Lars took his mackinaw from the closet and put it on. He opened the door and followed her out. He picked up a three-foot-long two-by-four that leaned against the porch and tapped it against a tree to knock off the snow. “I take this to your husband to brace his counter.” They walked in silence along the slippery tire tracks. It had stopped snowing. When they reached the bus station, Lars stopped and said, “You tell him Lars is here.”
“Aren’t you going to talk to him first?”
“We talk here. Inside we ruin the furniture.”
“Look, Lars, you just wait here and I’ll run get the cop.”
“No. You tell him to come out.”
“Don’t let him hurt you. Will you, Lars?”
“I not be hurt.”
“I couldn’t forgive myself for coming after you if you got hurt.”
“I not be hurt. Tell him.”
She hesitated, then opened the door and entered the bus station. He turned when the door opened and grinned when he saw she was alone, “Ha! So Lars’s a chicken-livered coward.”
“He’s waiting outside.”
“Just a big fat chicken-livered coward.”
“I said he’s waiting for you outside. Now.”
“Oh, he is, is he! We’ll just see about that. Tell him to get on in here.”
“He says he’ll see you outside.”
“Well, he’s just asking for the worst of it, making me come out to him.” He stood up and, flipping away the cigarette he’d been smoking, he stomped to the door and, yanking it open, yelled, “Lars!”
“I be here,” Lars said from next to his elbow.
The man ducked back clear of the open door “I’m coming out to get you, Lars.”
"I be waiting." This time Lars was speaking from the road where he had moved in order to get away from the window.

The man stalked out the door and through the snow to a point on the road about six feet from Lars, and, crouching and moving from one foot to the other, he started a stream of invectives. "I'm the meanest, toughest, unhoniest, nastiest fighter this side of Hell and I'm gonna rip you apart and stomp you and mangle and tear you limb from ..." The two-by-four caught him on the left temple, ringing out and echoing back in the clear night air. His feet came up off the ground and he lit on his side, skidding to a stop against a snow bank. Joe and his wife gasped from the doorway. The Lars walked over and jabbing the two-by-four into the snow bank, leaned on it and looked down at the man. "He be choosing wrong fellow that time." In the distance the approaching bus could be heard.

Andrew Tidemann, Engr. Sr.

Shadows

Bowel-less voices talk
Of damned society
While I plan my escape.
Malice, hatred, war all walk
Arm in arm with the brotherhood that binds me.
Across the Freudian landscape,
Elastic shadows stalk
My brittle sanity.

James Sage, Sc. & H. Sr.